

>>Snapshot

Tessa Thomas

Health Journalist

NUJ

**Can you tell us a bit about your career to date?**

I've been in journalism since the late 80's so have seen it in various states of flux. Work used to flood in but now it's a case of having to search it out – and the rates have gone down, making it harder to earn a good living.

I started off as an in house editorial assistant and have seen the industry go from huge in-house teams working with typewriters, pencils and rubbers to full computerisation and much smaller staff. I worked on Elle and The Telegraph magazines during that transition. I went freelance, when I started a family, to write about health, which is one of my abiding interests. I've written for the health sections of all the major papers – the Independent, Guardian, Telegraph, Express and Mail – as well as Parenting and Health magazines.

I now do more training people in writing skills rather than applying my own through journalism. It started when I volunteered with the Media Trust, which does great work giving voluntary organisations training and other access to media professionals. That then led to working with training agencies and universities, on their journalism courses. As a result of that, I've been able to provide training on presentation skills too.

What do you like most about your work?

The two aspects of my journalistic work I probably enjoy most are when I'm investigating a health issue and putting, say, food manufacturers or the pharma industry on the spot. Although the interviewing is the interesting bit, I also like the process of taking a jumble of notes and quotes and transforming it into a succinct package – very satisfying.

With the training I just enjoy sharing the knowledge I've built up over the years, and it's great when you are teaching and see the penny drop for someone. Also, with many quiet hours at my desk in a typical week, it provides an outlet for my more extravert side. It's nice

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to be able to take that passive activity of writing and, by passing it through the filter of teaching, turn it into a richly interactive process: hard work but, with the response you get, stimulating and enjoyable.

What are the biggest challenges of maintaining a freelance career?

One challenge is switching off. Health issues are all around us – increasingly so in fact – and it's hard to stop thinking about what would make a good story. Continuity of income is also an issue and, because of how the market has changed, I need like a lot of people in the creative industries to have a portfolio career. The variety is good but it does mean you have to constantly monitor how you are allocating your time, and make sure you don't spread yourself too thinly.

Have you added new work/skills to your portfolio over time?

The biggest addition to my skills has been the training I do – something I learnt on the job, so not overnight. Expanding my income was the initial motivation but it has been good as a result to discover other work that uses new combinations of those skills.



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What is the biggest challenge of learning the skills that you need?

The obvious and ever-present ones I suppose: money and time. The learning curves have sometimes been steep too, but I've generally found ways of developing the skills, which is gratifying. When you are employed you get guidance and training to support you through all that innovation and change but as a freelance there is nothing obvious provided. That is why I am genuinely appreciative of the training I've had through the FEU – an invaluable resource for people like me.

What FEU Training courses have you attended?

I've attended several courses including Negotiation for Freelancers, Developing Assertiveness and Building your Confidence.

What are the most important things that you've learned?

I think I've really benefited from all the workshops I've attended. Ones that stand out for me include the goal setting day, which gave me tools to manage my natural inclination to keep endlessly researching. Having an end point obviously makes you work more efficiently and that workshop really helped nail that. A phrase from the day that has stuck with me is 'Goals are dreams with deadlines.'

The assertiveness day was very good too and I think helped me be more assertive beyond family and friends. It was good to explore with others the differences between being assertive and aggressive – especially when you're doing role-plays with professional actors! Seeing in action how making excuses to avoid saying no doesn't work was enlightening – and amusing – too.

What I took home from that day combined with what I got from the Negotiation day helped me realise that I could negotiate rates I would previously have assumed were non-negotiable – including the rates I was offered from a training agency recently.

The Write that Book workshop was also a highlight and

the information, encouragement and inspiration I took from there combined with my new attitude to goals meant I came away determined to send a pitch off for a project that though still relevant had started to gather dust. I've now identified some agents and the proposal will soon be ready for my co-author's approval before sending it off. After a suggestion from a facilitator at the workshop with a broadcast background, I am also considering pitching this idea as a TV programme.

What has encouraged you to attend FEU Training sessions?

Benefiting from previous ones really. They are always densely packed with a wealth of information and opportunities to try things out. The workbooks, like the delivery, are well considered – a combination of simple tools and exercises that reveal structures and strategies.

They are also a great place to meet like-minded people both within and outside your sector. Actors and singers, for example, though they don't deal in the written word, have helped me learn things as much as journalists and writers because they come at things with a fresh perspective. It's always good to be reminded that you are not alone and that everyone is dealing with similar issues.

Being both free and local is obviously a major draw too.

Do you know any other organisation that offers business skills courses for creatives?

Not in this kind of way..

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